

Left Behind by Panino

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Summary: As things begin to quiet down in Hawkins, Nancy is left grieving for her best friend. Jonathan tries to help her pick up the pieces.

Left Behind

"Why are we even bothering with this? I mean, I'm pretty sure putting more clothes on you is the *opposite* of what Steve wants," her friend teases.

"Barb!" Nancy shifts uncomfortably at the thought, but fails to hide the crooked smile that works its way across her face.

"What? You know I have a point," she rebukes. "What about this one?"

Nancy glances at the garment Barb pulls off the rack. "Too frilly," she wrinkles her nose.

"I always thought you *liked* frilly." She holds it against Nancy's small frame before putting it back with a sigh.

They had been at it for a couple hours now, rifling through row after row. All this for *Steve Harrington*. There had been one that was nearly perfect. But when she tried it on, she found it showed a little too much skin for her comfort.

Barb, as always, was a sport through this grueling shopping spree. Her quips and sarcasm made the whole venture more pleasant. That and the fact that Nancy couldn't help but replay the promise Steve whispered to her after school on Friday. How had he put it?

I'll find somewhere we can be alone together.

"Not so much anymore," she says, coming back to the present. "Anyways, I think I should try something a little bolder."

Barb merely raises an eyebrow at this.

"He's really not as bad as you think he is," Nancy urges, trying to justify her infatuation with the boy once again. "He's just mis—"

A flicker of the lights and Barb is no longer at her side. Static fills her ears and Nancy finds she isn't in the boutique anymore, but standing in the woods again. The spindly branches of the trees reach up to the

charcoal sky. That eerie precipitation drifts down around her once more.

"Barb?" she calls out furtively, her breath coming up short. Heart hammering in her chest, she spins frantically, trying to pinpoint any sign of her friend.

Nance.

The whisper pierces her ears, causing the hairs on the back of her neck to bristle. Another flicker and her friend materializes before her at last.

"Barb...?" Nancy beckons. "Barb, come on. We have to get out—"

Her eyes register the blood first, tracing a crimson path down Barb's forearm as she cradles it against her chest. The girl's skin is devoid of all color. The worst though are the eyes. Two obsidian orbs boring into her.

Those pale lips part ever so slightly. Traces of bile stain the sides of her mouth.

This isn't you.

With a yelp, Nancy jolts upright. Her hair is matted against her clammy skin, the air rattling out of her in short gasps. Hands fisting in the sheets of her bed, her eyes flicker over the neatness of her room, mind still fumbling between dream and reality. It takes her another five minutes until she is calm enough to lay back down. Her eyes, however, remain open until the sun rises and the small town of Hawkins stirs from the grip of sleep.

Just another night in the Wheeler household.

Nancy realizes as she paces through the halls of Hawkins High that she has fallen into a similar guise as that faceless predator. Day to day, she wears a mask, trying to keep others from detecting her fragility. Though on the surface she's still the bookworm with the 4.0 GPA, she has never felt so alone, so close to the edge.

Most of the time she's able to convince herself that everything's fine. She throws herself into her schoolwork more than ever. While Steve convinces her to go on the occasional excursion, she often finds herself making excuses. Only a few years left until college. She needs that scholarship. Can't lose sight of her goals. Et cetera, et cetera. And though she knows she should've expected it, she realizes they've begun to drift apart. Steve doesn't try so hard anymore. And it doesn't bother her as much as she thinks it should.

Sometimes Nancy's guard slips. In the midst of a conversation amongst her few remaining friends, Barb's name will come up and Nancy finds herself freezing up entirely. Or there are the countless moments when she hears someone call her name from across the hallway, and for a split second before she turns she can't help but smile at the anticipation of seeing her spectacled friend. Only to be faced with a bitter taste in her mouth when she realizes it's just Deb from Chemistry trying to coax an answer out of her for the homework due next period. Nancy swallows hard. She wills the unwarranted anger to subside, hoping to prevent the ugliness from seeping through the cracks of her composed demeanor.

"What's up?" She'll call back, forcing herself to dawn a smile.

As much as Jonathan tries to distance himself from Nancy, she always seems to slip into his view. And while he knows he should avert his eyes before others notice, he can never seem to pull his eyes away from her. He can't deny that he misses her company after everything they'd been through. More than anything, he misses stealing glimpses of her shy smiles whenever he'd cracked the occasional joke. These days though, it's rare to catch that mesmerizing beam. There were hints as to how broken Nancy was truly feeling. He hadn't failed to recognize the way she fled from the hospital after witnessing Mike, Lucas, and Dustin reunite with Will. At that moment he felt a twinge of guilt. He had, after all, given her false hope that morning he woke up in her bedroom, promising her that as long as Will was alive there was a chance Barb was too. But in the end Will had come back, and Barb had not. He was able to see Will again, was given another chance to be a better brother. Nancy would never have that.

As time passed, he found them spending less and less time together. Between his photography, putting more hours in at the movie theatre, and keeping track of Will, Jonathan didn't have as much time to be there for Nancy—that is, if she even wanted him around. So he'd given her space and watched her from afar. Her and Steve reconciled and were back together.

Without a monster-slaying quest he's not sure where him and Nancy stand anymore. After Christmas, Jonathan had spent days wondering if the camera was simply a replacement for the one Steve had broken, or if it had some deeper meaning. The way Nancy had looked up at him after handing it over seemed to suggest the latter. But nowadays he's not so sure.

Shaking his head in an attempt to clear his confusion, Jonathan heads to the darkroom. He's halfway there when he notices someone leaning against the lockers. Nancy Wheeler. While Jonathan's in the middle of study hall, he knows that Nancy should be in Chemistry at this time of day. He'd never known her to skip a class before—at least when there were no monsters on the loose. She's clutching her books to her chest, her eyes closed.

After a few moments, her eyes snap open again. She seems to hesitate for a second, but strengthens her resolve and sets off towards the nearest exit. Before he can call out to her, she bolts past him, not even seeming to see him or anything else around her.

Puzzled, Jonathan forgets about the darkroom and follows.

At first Nancy doesn't quite know where she's going. She just needs to get away. Once she's outside and away from the school grounds, she falters for a moment, trying to figure out just where to run to. The late February air is crisp and refreshing. She takes a deep breath before heading in the direction of the playground her and Barb used to frequent a few years ago, when they still held onto those last remaining innocent years together. When she finally reaches her destination, she lets out a shaky breath, drops her bag to the ground and plops into a swing.

Part of her misses the scheming. Having something to direct all her

fear and anger towards. And a certain sandy-haired boy. Something tightens in her chest as she thinks about him. His baffled look as she kissed him on Christmas Eve. How his soft voice makes her want to lean even further into him when he speaks. Even the way he simply looks at her. There's something in those eyes that she can't spot in Steve's. They hadn't seen each other much over the past few weeks, aside from occasionally bumping into each other in the hallways, or the times he came over to pick up Will.

Yet some of the times when they are together, she can't stand to be around him. She knows she should be overjoyed for the Byers. And she is. But the jealousy and anger creep up on her regardless. So she hides, hoping that this hideous part of her grief remains out of sight. It's hers alone to bear after all. *She's* at fault for what happened to Barb.

The sound of crackling branches interrupts her thoughts. She spins to locate the source.

Jonathan.

"Hey," he says softly, rubbing the back of his neck, seemingly embarrassed at being caught red handed.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, a little surprised by how frigid she sounds. She stands from the swing.

"You just... seemed upset. So I wanted to make sure you were alright." He took another step towards her.

Her gaze softens slightly. Of course he would notice. She had never met anyone who'd been able to read her so easily. "I told you. I'm fine," she brushes him off. "I'm just feeling a little burnt out with school."

The boy tilts his head and shoots her a look that nearly makes her shiver. They're quiet for a moment.

"There's something going on, Nancy. I can tell," he presses. "Sometimes when you think no one's watching, you get this look on your face like..." He trails off, searching for the words.

"Like *what*, Jonathan?" Her gaze hardens.

"Like you're lost," he murmurs.

Part of her wants to crumble at his words. To find some form of solace in his presence. To *tell* him. That she's not okay. That she's never felt more alone. That she's convinced things will never go back to the way they were.

But instead she grits her teeth, and turns to leave. She's not ready for this conversation.

"Nancy, wait—"

She turns fractionally. "You have no idea what it feels like to just watch everyone move on with their lives, and try their best to forget everything that happened!" The words burn in her throat, but she swallows and continues. "I *can't* move on. "

She avoids his eyes then, knowing that they will just make her feel even more helpless. The way he seems to deconstruct her thought process without even speaking unnerves her. And at this moment it irritates her more than anything.

"So don't you *dare* try to analyze me, Jonathan Byers. Because even you don't understand."

Jonathan can't think of what to say to that. But as Nancy turns again to storm off, he closes the distance between them and grabs her by the shoulders without thinking, forcing her to face him again.

She thrashes against him, trying to wriggle out of his grip. But he holds her fast, and the only action of defiance she can summon is to pound her fist against his chest. She hears a soft *oompf* and repeats the action. Once, twice. Her hand falls limply to her side on the third go. Unable to stifle it any longer, a sob rips out of her throat. Her shoulders tremble with the weight of her breathing.

"I can't—" she whispers lamely, but cuts off her sentence, disgusted and embarrassed by the weakness in her voice. As if to hide, she buries her face in his shoulder.

She feels one of his hands come up to touch her back hesitantly.

"You're right," he says finally. "I don't understand."

She's shaking, and his hand begins rubbing her back in light circles. His chin rests atop her head. Pressed up against him, she can feel his steady breathing. And it's as if it provides a soothing rhythm for her to mimic. Gradually, her sobs recede and her breathing balances out.

"But at least let me try to help. I'm right here, Nancy."

Her fingers twine into the material of his jacket. Words escape her at this moment. Her mind is still reeling, and suddenly she realizes how exhausted she is. So instead of running, she closes her eyes and holds on tightly.

Author's Note:

Hmmmm... So this came out a bit gloomy, but I felt that with the way the show left off it didn't seem too realistic for Nancy and Jonathan to just jump into a relationship. So I had to get this outta the way before moving on to all the fluffy goodness! I may continue this if people seem to like it. Hope you guys enjoy!